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The importance of community context within Scottish lifelong learning: a case study

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Abstract This piece explores two questions key to the development of lifelong learning in the Centre for Open Learning at the University of Edinburgh: how to develop programmes that act in the public good and how to ensure such programmes align with overarching university priorities in teaching, learning and wider engagement. We discuss the challenge of balancing directives emerging from internal support needs; community and government priorities; and commercial sustainability. We briefly outline some of the programmes we run that address these distinct areas, and utilise recent focus group and marketing data to offer a nuanced perspective as to who engages with our lifelong learning provision. We explore how we can best measure the impact of what we do and use the results to drive forward future initiatives. We conclude by reflecting on what is needed from our institutional models of open learning in order that we might have an improved role in supporting public engagement activity; to ensure a sustainable financial approach, and to function as a provider of educational opportunities for the public good.

Key words: Lifelong Learning; Community Engagement; Short Course Programme Design; Widening Participation and Access.

Introduction

In this piece we address two points of tension and opportunity that are key to future and strategic developments of lifelong learning in the Centre for Open Learning at the University of Edinburgh: how to develop programmes that act in the public good and how to ensure such programmes align with University priorities.

Scottish contexts

The financial, economic and cultural environment within which lifelong learning currently operates in Scotland has been shaped by the financial and social policies brought in after the 2008 worldwide economic downturn. The recent Scottish Government-funded Commission on Widening Access in Scotland focused on lifelong learning as a tool primarily for enabling access to higher and further education for young adults in the 16-21 year brackets (COWA 2016). The final report, issued in March 2016, recommended that government priorities should align lifelong learning to widening access for younger entrants – i.e. 16-21 year olds, funding students from the 20 most deprived areas of Scotland, and offering young carers stronger educational opportunity and financial support. Such focus suggests that lifelong learning as an opportunity for those outside these defined clusters does not feature greatly in general policy considerations.

University of Edinburgh and the open learning environment

It is within this context that lifelong learning units in Scotland have had to define their operations and activities. And like many of these units, the University of Edinburgh's Centre for Open Learning negotiates its portfolio so as to satisfy three distinct agendas: internal support needs; community and government priorities; and commercial sustainability. Alongside a phase of strategic renewal, colleagues in the Centre are conscious that they need to ensure that what it does locally informs and interacts with how it is perceived and represented both internally and externally.

The range and diversity of the Centre's portfolio makes it the largest university provider of lifelong learning opportunities in Scotland. In the short course section alone, it offers more than 700 courses per academic year across 15 subject areas. This includes delivering one of the most diverse language programmes outside the London conurbation, with multiple levels of courses in more than 20 different languages. Within the academic offer, the Centre differentiates between credit and non-credit study. Thus it has students requiring its resources to progress into or through educational programmes¹; students also attend our classes for professional or personal development². An average 6,000 students enrol on its short course programmes every year.

In addition to short courses, COL is home to a respected English Language Education unit, who have more than 30 years' experience in providing a wide range of academic and specialist English courses for

international students and teachers to around 3,500 students per year. Their work contributes to the university's international strategy by way of intensive pre-sessional, sessional and summer programmes in English Language written and oral skills, joining similar global programmes within the Centre for Open Learning, such as our International Foundation Programme.

Whilst the Centre supports and aids progression for international students, its parallel programmes of Part-Time Access (intended for launch from 2018/19) and Credit for Entry address the need to support academic progression towards undergraduate study in a more local context. Students also have the option to enrol on a Certificate of Higher Education, a programme that is particularly welcomed by those returning to education and for whom the diversity of our short course programme is attractive without the impetus of progression to further study.

Modelling current student learner population

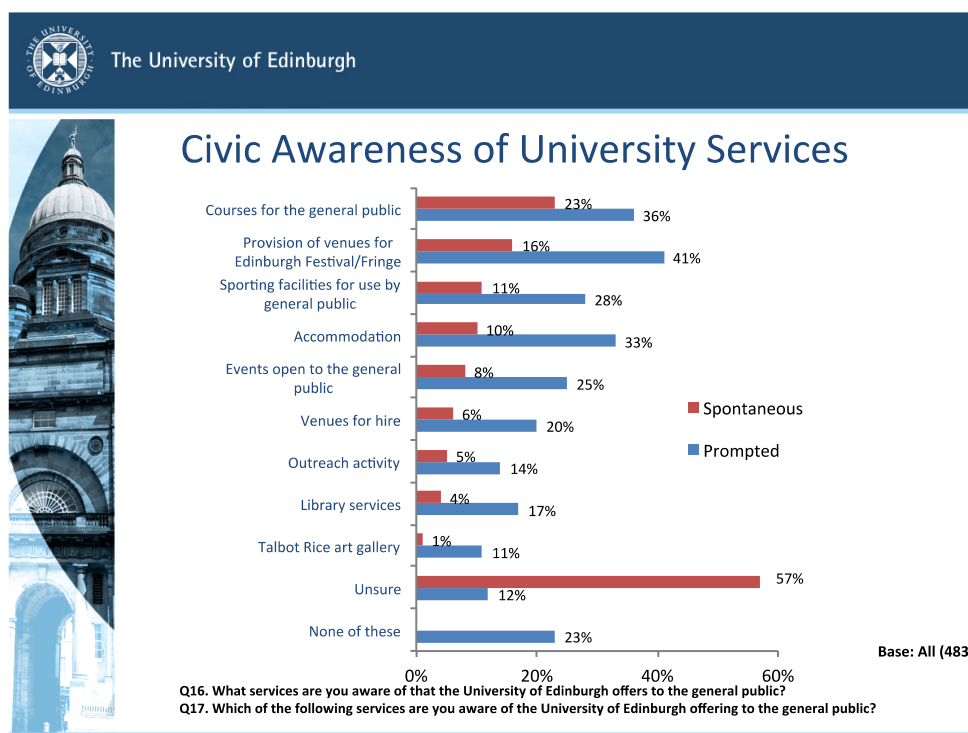
Given COL's need to reflect diverse learning interests within its course programming, it is vital it understands who those audiences are and how they currently engage with the centre and the University of Edinburgh. To capture this information and as part of its strategic development, in 2015 the Centre and the University's communications and marketing team commissioned several surveys looking at external and internal perceptions of the University's community engagement and lifelong learning work.

The first of these was a qualitative and quantitative survey conducted by the market research firm, Progressive, over the period 14 September to 9 October 2015.³ The key objective was to understand how the people of Edinburgh perceive the University in their community. 12 qualitative

telephone interviews were conducted with members of the public in Edinburgh to gain in-depth insights and help develop areas to be explored further in the quantitative survey. These were followed up by a qualitative street-based questionnaire survey of 483 adults across the Edinburgh City Council area, using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) technology. Care was taken to ensure the results reflected a representative non-probability sample (quota sampling) of the Edinburgh population based on 2011 Census data.

Survey results suggested that local community participants were pleased in general with what the University offered, though unprompted responses initially suggested they did not know too much specifically about the Centre for Open Learning and its diverse programming (23 per cent). This figure rose when prompted with a list of University services offered to the general public, to 36 per cent (See Figure 1). Follow up prompts suggested that 65 per cent have never used University services or facilities (including attending Edinburgh summer festival events in one of its buildings), but that 25 per cent were aware the University put on public events, that 10 per cent had attended one recently, and that six per cent had taken courses with COL at one point or other.

Figure 1: Civic Awareness of University Services



COL Survey of External Perceptions

In early 2015, the Centre undertook a parallel exercise in internal audience contextualisation of its community engagement agenda within the University, particularly in relation to the short course provision. Between March and April 2015, an eight-person working group undertook qualitative surveys, focus group work and telephone interviews with internal stakeholders on questions related to mission and identity.⁴ The key objective was to explore further the general perceptions of the Centre amongst the University community. Although limited in its scope, the feedback was helpful in underlining further what those who engaged with us internally thought we did and should do.

The team undertook strategic work targeting two key sectors: colleagues from COL and colleagues from the wider University. To address the first constituent, a focus group session was run with ten representative staff members from the short course and English Language Education tutor pools. This was followed by eight semi-structured interviews, including sessions with four University Vice-Principals, and 66 questionnaire responses from a range of University-based staff, including: School secretaries and administrative staff, directors of professional services, the Institute of Academic Development and International Office staff, international recruitment officers, Edinburgh University Student Association representatives and staff from University finance, admissions, and visiting student offices.

In addition to colleagues within the University, student opinions were captured in order to provide a fuller picture of how the Centre was perceived. As can be seen in the word cloud summary of key phrases and terms linked to COL (See Figure 2), in general, users surveyed associated the Centre with affordable, fun and friendly part-time learning opportunities. The feedback also suggested that in some quarters COL was perceived to be a less local, elitist institution (note the phrase elitist rather than elite). These particular perceptions from people who had attended our courses aligned somewhat with those from the central University survey responses. ‘It is very prestigious and I believe it is very difficult to get into’, commented one respondent, while a member of the public anonymously identified as living directly across from COL offices noted, ‘I don’t really know much else about them to be honest. Don’t really see them advertise unless it’s about intakes.’ (Gibson, 2015). Such feedback reminds us that Centres like ours must be aware of their community, mindful that maintaining and enhancing positive awareness of their offers is often crucially interlinked with growing student numbers and ensuring financial stability.

Figure 2: Word cloud of user perceptions of COL short courses

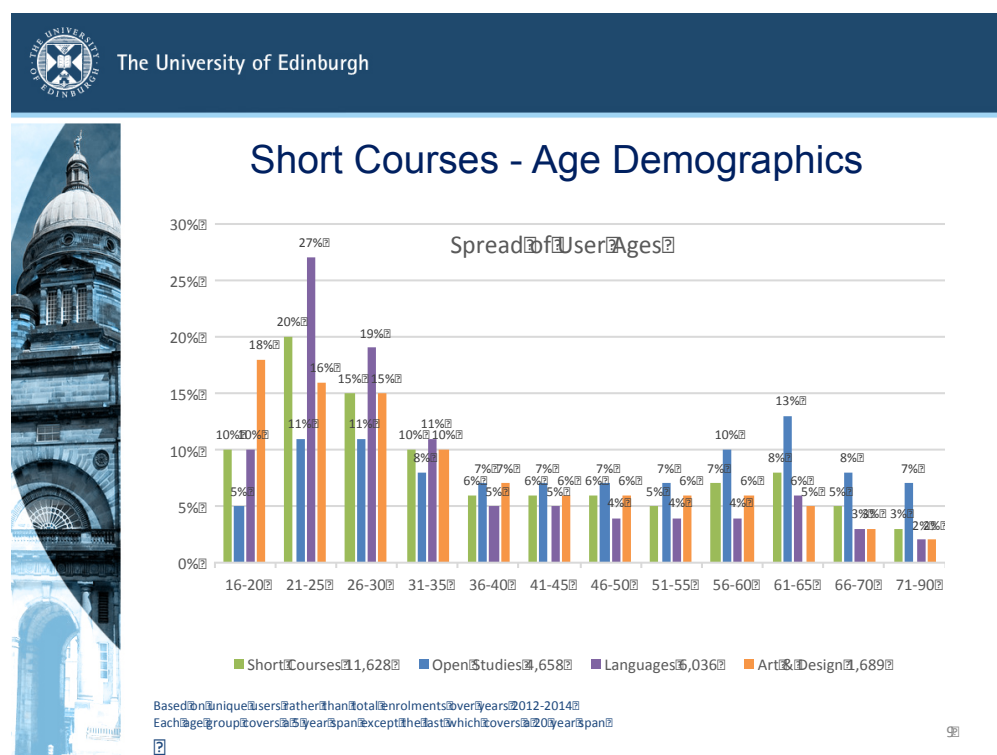


academic year. Therefore, the final data analysis was based on use of 11,628 individual student records.

Age, postcode and gender demographics

The data demonstrated a nuanced balance of students engaging with different aspects of the Centre's portfolio (See Figure 3).

Figure 3: Short courses - age demographics



In terms of age profile, the uptake of short courses overall was highest in the 21–30 age group (35 per cent of overall short course users were from this category). The 16–20 and 31–35 age groups were the next highest (accounting for 10 per cent each of overall users), while usage generally remained steady across the 36 and over age categories at an average of 5–6 per cent. It is interesting to note that the uptake for Open Studies courses

was equally as high in the 21–30 age group (22 per cent) as it was in the 56–65 age group (23 per cent). Languages recruited particularly highly in the 21–30 age group, with 46 per cent of its students in this range at the time of registration. Generally, most short course students in COL programmes fell between the ages of 16–35, with a strong Open Studies contingent recruited from the 56–70 age group.

Looking deeper into our short course student data, we discovered that perhaps, unsurprisingly, 87 per cent of students had Edinburgh postcodes, showing a high level of engagement with the city relative to our offer. The most popular postcodes give us some indication of the socio-economic status of students. The top 25 per cent of students live in relatively affluent areas of Edinburgh, such as the Grange, Blackford, Marchmont, Stockbridge, the West End, the New Town, Bruntsfield and Morningside. However, there are other parts of the city, including Leith, Newhaven and Restalrig that account for 11 per cent of users, arguably due to the changing demographics in these areas (anecdotally they are becoming more gentrified). However, there is little evidence that COL is currently reaching people within Edinburgh from lower socio-economic backgrounds. COL recognises that much more work must be done here in the longer term to ensure that it meaningfully addresses its widening participation responsibilities.

We observed a higher uptake among women participants across all short course areas. The bias is particularly strong in art and design, where 77 per cent of the student cohort sampled were women. Overall, women accounted for 64 per cent of all short course users between 2012 and 2015, and men accounted for 36 per cent.

Embedding survey conclusions in our curriculum

Taking these statistics and survey results on board, in 2016 COL began reshaping the processes by which it managed its provision and strengthened its relationships within the city of Edinburgh. The diversity of its programmes both in content and student profile has motivated the Centre in part to actively move away from using lifelong learning as an overarching term to describe what it does, embracing instead a more inclusive open learning nomenclature. The results have informed a renewed sense of purpose and identity within the unit.

A strong example of the Centre's renewed approach to gauging audience interest and participation in its courses emerged from the planning towards the University of Edinburgh's 2016 Innovative Learning Week (ILW). Once a year, and like many institutions across the UK, the University offers a week-long series of activities that encourages colleagues across the University to collaborate and engage in pedagogical and research-informed taster events, both within a university environment and with the local community. In 2016, this 'Festival of Learning' featured 263 events, of which 140 were open to the public (University of Edinburgh, 2016). These events ranged from practical science and medical demonstrations to arts, literature and visual culture performances, workshops and lectures. ILW in itself has been a successful way for the Centre and the University to engage with the wider community. More than 1,000,000 people were reached via social media and 5,000 ticket registrations were made for the events (University of Edinburgh, 2016).

COL's contribution to ILW included a one-day collaborative Children's Picture Books workshop, which emerged from collegial interaction between the Centre's relatively separate Creative Writing and Art and Design subject areas. Featured in the ILW programme, and marketed to the local community, the course very quickly exceeded the Centre's expectations in terms of interest, and shortly after brochure launch its 40 places were fully booked, with a waiting list of a further 65 potential participants. It was clear

that this particular course could have run successfully in multiple sessions had we been in a position to expand capacity.

Of the participants that attended this particular event, 45 per cent were internal (University students and staff), while 55 per cent were drawn from the local community, a satisfying number given that despite its marketing reach, this remained an internal event and not all that known across the city. Feedback from participants and staff alike reinforced the suggestion that there was an appetite for courses like this that were interactive and fleet of foot in relation to the overall annual course offer. As one respondent enthused, 'It was a brilliant experience and has left me feeling truly inspired,' while another commented that 'Fellow students produced some fantastic ideas and work; it was great to be part of a creative group all enjoying and making the most of a wonderful opportunity.' (Centre for Open Learning, 2016)

Modelling course opportunities

Following the success on the day, the Children's Picture Books workshop was joint winner of the 'Ideas in Play' award (for a course which best personified the spirit of the ILW 2016 theme of 'Ideas in Play'), as well as runner up for 'Best Community Engagement' experience. The positive results and feedback from this workshop pilot suggested a public appetite for the subject matter, leading colleagues to turn the pilot into a successful three-day course run over summer 2016.

Such piloting with community involvement enabled the Centre to gather information on the best ways to integrate cross-disciplinary teaching approaches and course delivery. It supported a hands-on learning experiment with a diverse, community-based audience. Shaped by local

community involvement in the pilot, the course is now embedded within the Centre's programming and we hope it will continue to engage well with learners from its community. It's clear that the Centre (and by implication units like it), needs to operate more strategically along such lines to ensure better community engagement in its activities in commercially sustainable fashion.

The Centre will apply similar testing processes to additional community events in the city, running pop-up classes and taster events. Alongside this, it will ensure that its new Part-Time Access programme is pervaded with a sense of civic value and renewed sense of purpose. COL aims to provide a short course provision that is meaningful to its students, offering opportunities that show knowledge of the community voice.

A recent statistical study into the importance of education to Edinburgh notes that Edinburgh is a comparatively educated city and an ideal space for high quality adult education provision; 51 per cent of working age residents have a degree or other professional qualification, against the Scottish average of 27 per cent. 5 per cent of working age residents in Edinburgh have no qualifications, against a Scottish average of 20 per cent (Edinburgh City Council, 2015). The Centre's planned introduction of focus groups and pilot programming with such audiences in mind is an important planning and marketing tool for engaging more productively with our participants. Through using knowledge exchange processes such as those outlined above, it is expected the Centre's activities will continue to play a significant part in enhancing general University community engagement initiatives.

Conclusion

A key point we have tried to address in this paper is whether lifelong learning units can act as significant drivers for enabling public engagement, or whether they function as adjuncts to access and widening participation strategies aimed at disadvantaged or conversely privileged sections of the community. Organisations like the Scottish Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (SUALL) and the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL) have highlighted how lifelong learning is a positive force in society for both public engagement and widening access. Networking opportunities and discussions, both formal and informal, nurtured through such collectives have enabled the sharing of best practice and robust responses to issues inherent within the UK lifelong learning sector.

In tandem with such network discussions, the Centre for Open Learning's ongoing analysis of its short course audiences and provision leads us to believe there remains an appetite amongst the general public in Edinburgh for university-based, open learning courses that address learning for its own sake. The Centre is acknowledging this appetite in part by putting in place mechanisms to trial new ideas, developing sustainable courses in partnership with local and national organisations, and proactively running activities linked to key events, commemorations and themes. This is not unique to Edinburgh or the higher education sector. Sustainable models for collaboration can be found elsewhere and outside the university sector, including conservatoires, private sector providers, non-governmental organisations and charities. It is worth considering how the process of co-developing programmes in partnership with external groups might expand our understanding of the diverse student population wishing to have a lifelong learning experience, enabling us to target and more efficiently reach relevant parties. With the extensive cutbacks to educational services in recent years, we need to acknowledge that such initiatives require a balance between being financially sustainable and creating socially relevant learning experiences. Such nuanced perspectives of lifelong learning requires us to

respond accordingly with meaningful curriculum design, intelligent financial modelling and clear marketing aimed at involving diverse communities from the start.

¹ From the available data recorded during terms 1, 2 and 3 of 2015/16, an average of 18 per cent of short course respondents cited progression into further study as a reason for enrolment.

² From the available data recorded during terms 1, 2 and 3 of 2015/16, an average of 91 per cent of short course respondents cited personal interest as a reason for enrolment.

³ Our thanks to Moira Gibson of the University of Edinburgh's communications and marketing team for allowing access to and use of survey results.

⁴ The working party drew together a cross section of University of Edinburgh representatives from the English language education, short courses and professional services teams.

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